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ABSTRACT

The issue of evaluation in adult literacy is addressed in this paper. It is assumed that evaluation is a necessary and vital function in an adult literacy program because it helps administrators understand their efforts, increases information available about a program's functioning, builds an image, and facilitates the discovery of information on unexpected program results. Three major topics are the focus of the discussion: (1) the perceived barriers to conducting evaluations of adult literacy programs, such as measurement or design problems, staff issues, relevance, and resource issues; (2) the range of evaluations of literacy programs that have been undertaken recently; and (3) recommendations for policies and practices that can be implemented to encourage the collection of useful and valid evaluation data, including disseminating information collected, requiring documentation of program results, encouraging volunteer literacy programs to collect data on program effectiveness, and clarifying incentives for conducting program evaluation. Contains 10 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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Evaluating Program Effectiveness

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Introduction

Over the past decade the role of evaluation has become an increasingly more integral part of the delivery of educational programs. The emphasis on accountability from program funders and the changing priorities in program development have necessitated the documentation and verification of program results. This concern has permeated all areas of education and has received significant attention in the recent educational literature. This paper addresses the issue of evaluation in the area of adult literacy. Three major topics will be the focus of this discussion: (1) the perceived barriers to conducting evaluations of adult literacy programs; (2) the range of evaluations of literacy programs that have been undertaken most recently; and (3) policies and practices that can be implemented to encourage the collection of useful and valid evaluation data.

Assumptions

As a point of departure for this discussion the assumption is made that evaluation is a necessary and vital function in an adult literacy program. Some reasons for this assumption are:

- Evaluation can help administrators of adult literacy programs build an understanding of their efforts that might otherwise take years to identify through regular program activities;
- Evaluation can rapidly increase the information that is available about a program's functioning and reduce the need for trial-and-error activity;
- Evaluation can be used to build an image that ordinarily comes slowly through contact with the program by and through its participants;
- Evaluation facilitates the discovery of information concerning unexpected program results that otherwise might go unnoticed (Steele 1977).

Thus a key function of evaluation is to generate information that can be used as one of the bases for making decisions about program improvements. In addition to the program improvement area, evaluation results can be utilized in the justification for the expenditure of program funds and in the argument for additional program monies. As the movement toward creating joint ventures between education, business, and industry progresses, it will be necessary to collect data that speak to the utility and effectiveness of the joint programs. All of these reasons support the assumption that evaluation plays a critical role in adult literacy programming.

Definitions

Ideas about evaluation have changed substantially over time with developments in design and methodology. In the past, evaluation was limited to determining whether content-specific objectives had been achieved. The creation of new types of programs has resulted in the conception of broader frameworks for determining program effectiveness. For the purposes of this paper, the following definition of evaluation will be utilized.

> Program evaluation is the systematic accumulation of facts for providing information about the achievement of program requisites and goals relative to efforts, effectiveness and efficiency within any stage of program development (Tripoli, Fellin, and Epstein 1971, 112).

A second concept that requires clarification for this discussion is adult literacy. In this paper adult literacy refers to the skills and knowledge acquired in reading, writing, and life-coping areas. The population discussed is those adults who have not obtained a high school diploma. This perspective is taken in order to maximize the number of literacy programs that can be examined in terms of the evaluation strategies that they have utilized.

Barriers to Evaluation

When the question of how to determine the effectiveness of adult literacy programs is raised, what frequently follows is a discussion of the reasons why conducting such an evaluation is difficult or impossible. Some of these barriers are concrete, while others are perceptions that are not necessarily substantiated by facts. Some of the more frequently cited barriers are discussed at length.[1]

Measurement/Design Problems

The key issue here is what to measure. It is difficult to construct a meaningful evaluation design once an adult literacy program has been operating for a period of time. Since the emphasis on measuring effectiveness is relatively new in adult literacy, in the 1970s many of the innovative programs were developed with little attention given to the evaluation design. What resulted was the creation of *ex post facto* designs for these programs, an effort that has involved a great deal of time and energy on the part of program staff and external consultants. Literacy programs that have been more evolutionary and responsive to changing clientele have experienced difficulty in deciding what to focus on in conducting an assessment of outcomes. This is compounded by the fact that most literacy programs have multiple outcomes for their clients. The issue of how to measure is complex and is one of the areas where perceptions may be a more significant barrier than the actual methodology. The general perception among adult educators is that a traditional experimental design is the only acceptable methodology to use in program evaluations. Given the structure of adult literacy programs with open entry and exit, and

the ethical issues involved in withholding services from a client, it is extremely difficult to construct such a design. These factors particularly affect the ability to collect data in a consistent fashion. There are a number of alternatives that are appropriate and can be applied to adult literacy programs. Steele (1977) has outlined over fifty approaches that can be used in evaluating programs that serve disadvantaged adults. One aspect of the measurement problem is an informational one, in that program administrators do not have the data that they need to make an informed decision about an appropriate measurement design.

Staff Issues

Related to the issues of what and how to measure is the question of who is to direct the measurement process. Most adult literacy program administrators are not trained in evaluation techniques nor do they have access to staff who can perform that function. The volunteer programs are particularly impeded because of the fluidity of the staffing pattern and the implication that this has for the collection of data. Thus a key problem is access to expertise in measurement and design. Another issue concerns the staff's perceptions about the relationship of evaluation activities to ongoing program functioning. Often staff feel that collecting data, either by questionnaires or by testing instruments, can be disruptive to the instructional process. Again, one aspect of this problem may be informational, when staff have not been included in discussions about the type and format of data collection. In addition, the staff may not understand the relevance of the information that is being requested to what they are doing in facilitating learning. A key point here is one of incentives: if the staff members are critical in assessing the effectiveness of the program, then they need to understand what the benefits are of participating in this activity.

Relevance

The focal point of the evaluation activity is usually the adult attending the literacy program. Sometimes the adults resist participating in assessment activities either because these activities are associated with negative experiences that they have had in prior educational programs, or because they do not understand how the evaluation activities relate to the learning process. The issue of relevance is particularly important when adults are asked to respond to questionnaires after they have completed the program. Their willingness to participate in evaluation activities is often affected by their understanding of the rationale and utility of the process.

Resource Issues

A major objection to conducting an evaluation is usually resource-related. The human resource problem has already been noted. The issue of the availability of adequate financial resources to undertake a proper evaluation is one that is not readily solved. The problem should be analyzed so that the var-

ious components that are needed can be identified and alternatives devised to meet these needs. In recent years the majority of federally funded grants have required that evaluations be conducted. Even with this requirement, program concerns often have taken priority and the evaluation component has been reduced in scope from the original proposal. The resource issue should be delineated so that appropriate solutions can be identified to meet the needs.

An understanding and recognition of these barriers is critical if evaluation is to become an ongoing part of adult literacy programs. Some of the barriers have recognizable solutions, others require innovative thinking about the way in which they can be overcome. In the final section of this paper recommendations will be given as to how to deal with the barriers. First, however, it is useful to examine some of the literacy program evaluations that have been undertaken in recent years in order to understand how some have dealt with the issues that have been discussed here.

Recent Evaluation Efforts

It is difficult to ascertain the magnitude of the effort that has been made in evaluating adult literacy programs. Little is published in the educational literature and only one large-scale evaluation has been commissioned in recent years by the federal government. An area where significant progress has been made is with regard to the U.S. Department of Education's Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP) process. As of this time seven adult literacy programs have been validated by the JDRP. A number of other adult literacy programs are in the process of preparing for the JDRP or are beginning to address the effectiveness issue by structuring formal evaluations. Pressure from funders and a desire to understand the effects of program implementation have prompted the evaluation activity. The various evaluation efforts that have been undertaken will now be discussed. In 1980 Development Associates examined the state-administered Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs, in which they investigated the activities undertaken by the ABE programs, including content areas covered in the curriculum, methods and location of instruction, and learner outcomes. The data generated from this study provided an informed overview of what has been accomplished by the ABE programs. It has also raised a number of issues that deserve further attention and examination. Whereas the national study outlined trends among the ABE programs, what is needed is a clearer understanding of the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of specific programs. The issue might best be explored using a case study approach with a sample of selected ABE sites.

The adult literacy programs that have been validated by the Joint Dissemination Review Panel represent notable attempts at program evaluation. While each of the program's evaluation designs differed in structure, certain commonalities exist among them. Learner gains were the focal point of the APL Project (1979), Project CLASS (1980), FLIT: Functional Literacy (1974), Jefferson County Adult Reading Program (1982), and Project F.I.S.T. (1983),

while the CASAS Project (1984) and the New York State External High School Diploma Program (Alamprese 1979) chose the assessment system as their focus. CASAS presented evidence concerning the effectiveness of implementing a statewide competency-based adult assessment program and the New York State External Diploma Program supported its claim of being a reliable and valid testing system. Data concerning a program's ability to retain its students was supplied by CASAS, the Jefferson County Reading Program, and the External Diploma Program.

While each of the seven programs had data collection activity built into their normal program process, each had to either present the evidence in new configurations or collect additional information about program effectiveness in order to complete the JDRP submission. This supports a point raised earlier in this paper concerning the difficulty of working with an *ex post facto* design. The issue is not whether it is necessary to undertake an evaluation that meets the criteria established by the JDRP, but rather that it saves time and resources in the long run if one is able to plan a formative evaluation at the outset of a program. A number of adult literacy programs that utilize volunteers as their primary service deliverers have been dealing with the issue of how to measure program effectiveness. For example, Literacy Volunteers of New York City is in the process of conducting an evaluation that was designed by Matrices, Inc. This evaluation plan takes into consideration the issues of time, staff, and resources and examines the program's context and process in relationship to outcomes. Several forms of data collection have been proposed that do not intrude on service delivery and that can be intergrated into the program functioning. Other volunteer programs are focusing on the collection of demographic data, with the hope of being able to systematically collect information on learner outcomes at some point.[2] While demographic information does provide a basis for planning recruitment activities and the utilization of staff resources and can be incorporated in funding applications, it is not as persuasive as data that speak more directly to effectiveness issues.

The attempts being made by adult literacy programs to include some form of evaluation activity in their implementation process are encouraging. Most program administrators are confronted with the problem of juggling time, resources, and staff in ways that best meet their needs and those of their clients. If the trend toward measuring program effectiveness is to continue and grow, some assistance in this area will need to be given to adult literacy programs. Recommendations regarding the types of assistance that are required to promote the utilization of evaluation are discussed in the next section.

Recommendations

The paper thus far has examined the evaluation dilemma in adult literacy programs in terms of barriers that impede the evaluation process and has reviewed a number of adult literacy programs which have successfully mea-

sured and documented their results. The following recommendations concerning policies and practices that can be implemented to facilitate the evaluation of adult literacy programs are proposed for consideration.

1. Information about evaluation approaches for assessing the effectiveness of adult literacy programs should be collected, analyzed, and prepared for dissemination.

A key factor inhibiting the assessment of adult literacy programs is the lack of adequate information about appropriate evaluation methods. Alternative approaches for assessing effectiveness need to be identified and compiled in a form that can be understood and assessed by literacy program administrators. That is, strategies already documented, such as those cited in Steele (1977), and as well, those that have been identified in the National Adult Literacy Project's survey of effective programs and in related searches, should be assimilated and categorized. Having a compendium of evaluation approaches that are alternatives to the traditional experimental design would be an initial step in facilitating the evaluation process. This activity would most likely require discrete funding, such as through a foundation or with Section 310 monies (Section 310 of the Adult Education Act). As an interim step, journals dealing with adult literacy and adult learning questions could dedicate one issue to exploring alternative evaluation strategies.

2. There should be an increase in the mechanisms available for enhancing the skills and abilities of adult literacy staff in measuring, documenting, and utilizing program results.

Training and technical assistance must be made accessible to literacy program staff who would like to implement evaluations. This could be in the form of direct assistance in conducting the evaluation (e.g., how to choose an evaluation approach), or in indirect service, such as brokering information about evaluation processes. There are several alternatives for providing this technical assistance. An independent organization with a focus on adult learning could be created to deliver direct services and broker information to those engaged in literacy activities. On another level, federal evaluation staff could provide information on adult literacy programs that incorporated evaluation approaches which can be transferred. State education department staff could be trained to provide technical assistance to literacy programs in their state. Evaluation personnel at the local school district level could be identified and encouraged to work with literacy program staff in planning evaluations. Finally, evaluation workshops could be scheduled at the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) and Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) annual meetings to train those interested in assessing program outcomes. This recommendation is comprehensive and would require both new resources and a reallocation of existing resources.

3. Organizations funding adult literacy programs should encourage, if not require, documentation of program results and should provide adequate resources for this activity.

If the quality of teaching and learning in adult literacy programs is to be improved, it is critical to have an understanding of those instructional processes and materials that are effective in obtaining results. Literacy programs should be encouraged to conduct both formative and summative evaluations. The information obtained in the formative evaluation can be used to clarify program and client goals and to redirect program activities so that these goals can be met. A summative evaluation would provide the necessary information to ascertain both intended and unintended program results.

4. Coordinating agencies for the volunteer literacy programs should encourage their affiliates to collect data on program effectiveness and should provide leadership in facilitating the process.

The volunteer programs that deliver literacy services can be singled out here because of the special problems involved in evaluating these programs. Leadership is needed to provide assistance and direction to volunteer programs so that they can overcome the staffing and time problems associated with the collection of data. Documented program results in this area would be helpful so that effective models could be identified and transferred to those interested in establishing volunteer programs.

5. Incentives for conducting program evaluations should be clarified and reinforced.

This recommendation is more general than the others and speaks to an underlying problem that inhibits progress in this area. One reason for the reluctance to conduct an evaluation is that the benefits for doing so are not always so clear. Literacy program staff should be an integral part of the planning phase of the evaluation. They should be given ample information regarding what is expected of them and their students and how their program will benefit from the evaluation process. Likewise, program administrators have to be better informed about the ways in which the evaluation data might be analyzed and reported, and how the program results can be effectively utilized for funding and legislative purposes.

The issues and problems raised in this paper and the recommendations that have been proposed are meant to highlight the importance of evaluation in adult literacy programs. If the quality and scope of the literacy effort is to increase, then attention must be focused on improving the evaluation activities undertaken.

Notes

1. The discussion presented in this section is based on data the author has collected in the course of her work consulting with adult education program administrators in evaluation design.
2. Information concerning the data collection activities of these programs was assembled by the author as part of her work in another project.

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